Imaginary Hybridities : Geographic, Religioius and Poetic Crossovers in Victor Hugo's "Les Orientales"

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CHAPTER xxx

IMAGINARY HYBRIDITIES. GEOGRAPHIC, RELIGIOUS AND POETIC CROSSOVERS IN HUGO'S *LES ORIENTALES*

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Abstract

Without ever having travelled across the Mediterranean Sea, Victor Hugo dreamed all at once of "the Orient" (meaning both what one calls nowadays the Middle-East, and a mostly imaginary version of the Orient, derived from *The Arabian Nights*) and of a new relation between the Orient and the West. Moving borders around, and displacing centres, including centres of consciousness and positions of enunciation, the poet, as soon as 1829, forced his readers to reflect on their own identities, by suggesting the dynamic, or rather multiple nature of their identity. In poems such as "La captive" or "Adieux de l'hôtesse arabe", Hugo stages a mutual, albeit problematic seduction between two seemingly antagonistic cultural spaces, the Orient and the Western world. The question of languages is also central in *Les Orientales*, where foreign words and orientalised rhythms abound, thus constituting a defiant Romantic challenge to classical aesthetics. Moreover, the relationship between Islam and Christianity, a haunting subject for many nineteenth-century writers after Chateaubriand, is progressively reassessed as the reader progresses in Hugo's collection of poems: "Voile" (XI) stages a dark version of Islam, still very much indebted to the concept of "oriental despotism" generated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, whereas a poem like "Sultan Achmet" (XXIX), significantly included in the Spanish cycle of *Les Orientales*—Spain, from the very preface of the book, constitutes an in-between space—makes it possible to conceive of a religious reconciliation, mediated by the love of a Muslim for a Christian woman, although of course the former first has to become a convert. What Hugo seems to be doing is not to deny or annihilate differences, but rather to play with them so as to demonstrate that the "Orient" is within us. That is why the notion of hybridity, as theorised in postcolonial studies, can help us to perceive the astonshing modernity of a collection of poems that has far too long been wrongly considered as the illustration of a lazy and fashionable exoticism.

Les Orientales were published in January 1829, and were a pure product of the author's imagination, as Hugo never crossed the Mediterranean sea.[1] This orientalist poetry is innovative from all perspectives, since it also constituted a new development in Hugo's own poetic production. The Orient had already made an appearance in Hugo's *Les Ballades*. But reading just a few lines of "La Fée et la Péri", which dates from 1824, gives a clear illustration of how stereotypical this orientalism was: "My world is the Orient, a brilliant region/where the sun is as noble as a king in his tent"*.[2] Five years later, Hugo's Orient has become much more contrasted, thus more complex. Whilst it is still in thrall to the myth of "oriental despotism" (as in "Heads of the Seraglio" ["Têtes du sérail"] or "Veil" ["Voile"]), it is no longer obsessed by the image of the cruel, barbaric and tyrannical Turk, as is still the case with Chateaubriand in *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem* (1811). Favouring a sensual orientalism that finds its origins in *Les Mille et une Nuits*, Galland's translation from Arabic into French of *The Arabian Nights*, Hugo tends to *feminise* his object, which opens up the prospect of an alternative representation of the Orient.

An in-between area

Let us start with an observation. *Les Orientales* thrust the reader into a space that is not only *other* but also *in motion*. "The Scourge of Heaven" ("Feu du ciel"), the poem which opens the collection, tells the story of a dense

[1] This paper has been translated into French by Emma Cypher-Dournes. The translations of the quotations from Hugo are either borrowed from The Project Gutenberg EBook of Poems (http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8hugo10.txt) or are Emma Cypher-Dournes's own. Translations by Emma Cypher-Dournes will be indicated with an asterisk after the quote. The original French quotations will be given in footnotes, all references being to Franck Laurent's edition.

[2] "Ma sphère est l'Orient, région éclatante/Où le soleil est beau comme un roi dans sa tente" (1980: 398).

cloud crossing the skies of the Ancient Orient before blazing down on cursed cities. "My Napoleon" ("Lui"), the penultimate poem, echoes this triumphant journey, listing Napoleon's conquests. Throughout the collection, the reader is involved in a dynamic *process,* a geographical journey which takes us on a Mediterranean tour (the main calling points being Greece, Turkey and Spain), but a tour that also takes us into unidentifiable places, which we could describe as a sort of interior Orient, that can be either soothing ("Dream" ["Rêverie"]) or unsettling ("Fragments of a Serpent" ["Les Tronçons du serpent"]), but which are always hugely seductive.

Let us take for example "The Turkish Captive" ("La Captive"), poem IX of *Les Orientales*, which comes after "Pirates' Song" ("Chanson des pirates") of which it is clearly the sequel. This latter poem tells the tale of a nun captured in Sicily and sold as a slave in a harem, after having been converted to Islam. At first, violence is thus done to a European Christian ("she cries, begs, calls"*)[3] who however, once captured, seems not only to accept her lot but to truly appreciate this Orient into which she has been thrust. It is true that this affection is not immediate: "Oh! Were I not a captive, I should love this fair country".[4] But even before we read the avowal which is the leitmotiv of the poem ("But still I love this bank/[...]/I love these tall red turrets/[…]/I love [...]/These swaying tents [...]/I love the burning odours/This glowing region gives",[5] etc.), the initial expression already described the prisoner's attraction towards her prison. A prison which indeed is no such thing, given how open to the outside world it appears to be: the sea, the maize fields, the stars. From the first stanza we are thrust into a pure Hugolian world which stretches, both vertically and horizontally, almost to infinity. Furthermore, the end of the poem shows us that it is possible to cross the threshold of the harem, and that nature is not reduced to a distant vision ("I love on a mossy couch to sing/A Spanish roundelay…"[6]). It is true that the following poem, "Moonlight on the Bosphorus" ("Clair de lune"), which can be seen as the sequel to "The Turkish Captive", brings an end to that harmonious air: the sultana (which the manuscript shows was initially a captive [IX, p. 112, note 3]) who listens at the window, hears "a sound [...] dull and low"[7] which turns out to be that of "heavy bags from which sobs can be heard"*[8] and which are thrown into the sea. This brings us back to a "despotic" Orient, which will be cruelly illustrated in the following poem, "The Veil" ("Le Voile"), which tells of the murder of a woman by her four brothers for showing her face to a man (XI, p. 114-116). Nevertheless, "The Turkish Captive" represents a shift from the West to the Orient, and the heroine seems to have transformed the constraints of her captivity into a happy dream—a dream which may indeed make us think of the poet himself, this born dreamer ("Enchanting/At night, it is to me/To sit, where winds are sighing/Lone, musing by the sea").[9]

But for all this, has the captive become an Oriental? Doesn't the very fact that she has been seduced by her environment, to the extent of idealising it, show that she had maintained within her an element of Western customs? In short, wouldn't a total "orientalisation"[10] induce in her a different relationship with the Orient, even if it was totally imaginary? We know that the admiration of a landscape is generally the product of an exterior point of view (for example that of a traveller) rather than that of the "natives" who tend to have a more pragmatic relationship with their environment. It is therefore precisely because she is not an Oriental that the captive can appreciate the harem, which she idealises as a "fairy palace".[11] She is not oriental and yet she would like to be so: her identity is suspended midway, in the tension between memory and the future.

To this fluctuating dimension of identity (which is basically no more than that of History itself) is added a geography which is also ambivalent, as historically Smyrne straddles both East and West. It is in this city (today Izmir on the western coast of Turkey) that the captive is to be found ("With her chapelles fair Smyrna/A gay princess is she!").[12] Yet this Turkish port on the Aegean sea, as Franck Laurent reminds us in a note, "was a trading city, rich and cosmopolitan, where Turks, Greeks, Jews and Westerners coexisted until the twentieth century"* (IX, p. 110, note 2). For French travellers at the time of Hugo, Smyrne was one of the Eastern Ports of Call,[13] a place where many populations mingled, and where in the nineteenth century the Lingua Franca (*langue*

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[3] "Elle pleure, supplie, appelle" (VIII, v. 28, p. 108). Regarding *Les Orientales*, one may refer to the extensive introduction by Franck Laurent to the 2000 LGF edition, as well as Sarga Moussa (2001) and the series *Victor Hugo 5, autour des « Orientales »*, texts gathered and introduced by Claude Millet. For links with orientalist painting, see the recent catalogue of "Les Orientales" organised by Danielle Molinari *et al.* at the Maison Victor Hugo (2010).

[4] "Si je n'étais captive, j'aimerais ce pays" (IX, v. 1, p. 109).

[5] "Pourtant, j'aime une rive/[…]/J'aime ces tours vermeilles,/ […]/J'aime […]/Ces tentes balancées […]/J'aime de ces contrées / Les doux parfums brûlants…" (IX, v.????, p. 110-111).

[6] "J'aime en un lit de mousses/Dire un air espagnol" (IX, v. 57-58, p. 111).

[7] "un bruit sourd" (X, v. 6, p. 112).

[8] "sacs pesants, d'où partent des sanglots" (X, v. 17, p. 113).

[9] "La nuit j'aime être assise,/Être assise en songeant,/L'œil sur la mer profonde" (IX, v. 67-69, p. 111).

[10] This process is of course at work in *Les Orientales*, as Franck Laurent convincingly demonstrated, particularly in the introduction to his edition (14). I would simply suggest here that this "orientalisation of the I" remains incomplete, – indeed, this is unquestionably the condition for hybridisation.

[11] "palais de fée" (IX, v. 41, p. 110).

[12] "Smyrne est une princesse/Avec son beau chapel" (IX, v. 25-26, p. 110).

[13] Called "Échelles du Levant" in French.

franque) was still spoken (a blend of the various languages spoken in the Mediterranean ports).[14] Chateaubriand tended in *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* to highlight the western elements of the place ("Smyrne, where I saw a multitude of hats, looked like an Italian maritime city where one district was inhabited by Orientals"*),[15] yet he also speaks of the mild climate which he associates with the "gentle Ionia",[16] or a feminised Asia Minor. Hugo, on the other hand, orientalises this city, saturating it with exotic imagery (tents, elephants, palm trees, minarets...) and bathing it in the balmy atmosphere of an epicurean Islam (he precedes his poem with verses from Sadi, the famous Persian lyricist of the thirteenth century.) At the same time, from the second stanza in the poem, he has the captive say: "I am no Tartar maiden",[17] that is to say, she is not Turk: the young Italian nun has therefore not forgotten her origins, but everything occurs as if the fact of now living in Smyrne, a border area where West and East meet, allows this transformation of identity to take place consciously and deliberately, whereas initially it had been forced upon her. Ultimately, it is precisely because she finds herself in a "third space" (Bhabha) where Christians and Muslims live side by side, and where, in addition, traders and sailors create the link between the two shores of the Mediterranean sea, that the European captive can embody her orientalist reveries.

A love without borders

Within *Les Orientales* this "third space" is perfectly illustrated in what can be considered as a short Spanish cycle, and particularly in poem XXXIX, "The Obdurate Beauty" ("Sultan Achmet") which opens this cycle. Also clearly associating itself with the Persian love tradition (this time Hugo quotes from Hafiz), this poem celebrates the triumph of love over religious interdictions:

To Juana ever gay, Sultan Achmet spoke one day "Lo, the realms that kneel to own Homage to my sword and crown All I'd freely cast away, Maiden dear, for thee alone."	*À Juana la Grenadine,* *Qui toujours chante et badine,* *Sultan Achmet dit un jour :* *Je te donnerais sans retour,* *Mon royaume pour Médine,* *Médine pour ton amour.*
"Be a Christian, noble king! For it were a grievous thing: Love to seek and find too well In the arms of infidel. Spain with cry of shame would ring, If from honor faithful fell."	*– Fais-toi chrétien, roi sublime !* *Car il est illégitime,* *Le plaisir qu'on a cherché* *Aux bras d'un Turc débauché.* *J'aurais peur de faire un crime.* *C'est bien assez du péché.*
"By these pearls whose spotless chain, Oh, my gentle sovereign, Clasps thy neck of ivory, Aught thou askest I will be, If that necklace pure of stain Thou wilt give for rosary."	*Par ces perles dont la chaîne* *Rehausse, ô ma souveraine,* *Ton cou blanc comme le lait,* *Je ferai ce qui te plaît,* *Si tu veux bien que je prenne* *Ton collier pour chapelet.* (168-169)

This time it is the masculine Orient which approaches the feminine West, in a movement which is the mirror image of that of "The Turkish Captive". This dialogue takes place in Grenada, Andalucía, once under Arab domination. Although Spain belongs to Europe, it is a Europe which both historically and geographically is close to the Muslim East. In the preface, Hugo goes even further: for him "Spain is still the Orient"*.[18] Consequently, what is striking is the romantic poet's taste, visible from the opening lines of his collection, for complex areas which cannot be reduced to one single category, such as religion. Indeed, Goytisolo clearly showed the ambivalence of Spanish literature itself when faced with the figure of the Moor, portrayed as an enemy who is sometimes hated, sometimes idealised (9ff). As for Hugo, he tends to adopt a strategy of indecision, if we may

[14] See Dakhlia.
[15] "Smyrne, où je voyais une multitude de chapeaux, m'offrait l'aspect d'une ville maritime d'Italie, dont un quartier serait habité par des Orientaux" (234).
[16] "la molle Ionie" (238).
[17] "Je ne suis point tartare" (IX, v. 9, p. 109).
[18] "l'Espagne, c'est encore l'Orient" (52).

describe it thus. Spain having had, in the past, a double constitution, it appears as a paradise for meetings between Christians and Muslims. As in Chateaubriand's *Aventures du dernier Abencérage*, of which it is both a re-writing and an extension, "The Obdurate Beauty" is clearly set after the *Reconquista*. Whereas in his novella published in 1826, Chateaubriand dramatised the impossible love between Aben Hamet (who had returned to his ancestral home of Grenada) and Blanca (who begs him, in the end, to return to "the desert"), Hugo tells the tale of requited love between a Muslim and a Christian, in doing so breaking the religious taboo. Love and religion are thus inextricably linked, embodied in the transformation of Juana's necklace into a rosary—the sacralisation of a female ornament which symmetrically desacralizes the object of devotion itself.

Whereas the captive in the poem studied earlier still expressed some regret at the lost homeland, Sultan Achmet announces from the outset that he will give up everything for his "monarch". And he establishes a hierarchy of values, which places the holy city of Medina above his kingdom, but the love that he feels for Juana above the city where the Prophet found refuge. A fine example of romantic passion, that transcends both temporal and spiritual power. We could be tempted to wonder whether we are really in the presence here of a form of hybridisation: does this change in identity not rest on a single conversion, and is not the price to be paid for this mixed marriage the capitulation of Islam in the face of Christianity? In reality, Juana has also capitulated, she says as much obliquely but perfectly clearly. We only have to re-read the second stanza to be convinced. Because the conversion that she asks of her lover is indeed the price to pay for an act ("This is enough of a sin"*[19]) committed prior to this lovers' banter.

Juana thus admits to having sinned. But what credence should we give this admission, and to what extent is her repentance sincere? She can talk about the "pleasure that *one* has found/In the arms of a debauched Turk"*.[20] The French neutral personal pronoun creates what Leo Spitzer would call "a muted effect" (208ff), which is frequently used in classical language—"*one*" is an easy substitute for the unutterable pronoun "I". As for the sobriquet of "debauched Turk" which Juana bestows upon her lover, it seems to me that it should not be taken too literally, but seen as a sort of ironic nod (an allusion to the cliché of the polygamous Muslim), addressed to the person who, in the same stanza, is described as a "noble king".[21] Aware of the unflattering images of Islam that her fellow Spaniards resort to, the beautiful Grenadine only refers to them to better rid them of meaning. As for Sultan Achmet, he provides all the assurances of total loyalty, showing in his gestures and words the futility of what Edward Saïd would later call an "orientalist discourse". Both parties have therefore taken risks. They have each lost something (the Christian her innocence, the Muslim his religion), but this loss—and herein maybe lies one of the lessons of *Les Orientales*—is the necessary and paradoxical condition for gaining something else, at the cost of a destabilized identity. It is symptomatic that Hugo chose Andalucía, where West and East were fused, as the meeting place where his hybrid couple of lovers, a couple whose future seems wide open and promising.

A renewed poetry

The question of hybridity covers not only the geographical and religious interferences (and thus questions of content) but also the very language used by the poet. *Les Orientales* are strewn with foreign words, notably Arabic and Turkish words, that Hugo plays with to make them clash and ring, for the pleasure of hearing these new sounds: "spahis", "timariots", "capitans-pachas", that we encounter from the very first cycle of poems dedicated to the Greek-Turkish war, have as much value for their meaning (which refer to a variety of grades within the Ottoman army) as for the alliterations and assonances that they produce. We find the same crackling sounds with the enumeration of strange embarkations in the poem "Navarin" (V, p. 96ff)—"chébecs", "caïques", "felouques", etc. A modern edition of *Les Orientales* clearly has to provide a translation in the footnotes of these unfamiliar terms. But Hugo himself chose not to explain them, as they produce a sort of linguistic hybridisation that is sought after by romantic poets, as it plays its part in a profound renewal of the lexicon of his own language.

Hugo attempted to achieve the resulting lyrical strangeness not only from a lexical perspective but also from the metric rhythm. Thus, a number of poems of the Spanish cycle are based on a seven syllable line, which is a reminder of the rhythmic structure of romance poetry in medieval Spain. This is the case throughout both "The Obdurate Beauty", and "A Moorish ballad" ("Romance mauresque"), the next poem. As for "Grenada", which allows Hugo to produce a virtuoso catalogue of Spanish towns (and thus demonstrate the profoundly multicultural character of this country): "Tolède with its Moorish alcazar / Sevilla with its Giralda"*,[22] it is made up of alternating stanzas of even and uneven numbers of syllables per line—another form of hybridization which

[19] "C'est bien assez du péché"
[20] "plaisir qu'*on* a cherché/Aux bras d'un Turc débauché".
[21] "roi sublime".
[22] "Tolède a l'alcazar maure,/Séville a la giralda" (XXXI, v. 55, p. 176).

renews the classic metrical rhythm without abandoning it for all that, as the alexandrine and the octosyllabic line go side-by-side with the heptasyllabic line in this poem. The Orient is a source of inspiration for the poet of *Les Orientales*, but also plays a liberating role, which allows all sorts of formal boldness. The most remarkable example is without doubt "The Djinns" ("Les Djinns"), a veritable *Caligramme*, anticipating Apollinaire. This poem visually imitates on the page the passage of the persecuting swarm, each stanza increasing the number of syllables per line before repeating the same movement in reverse.

To finish, mention should be made of a poem which is part of the nocturnal imagination of Hugolian orientalism, the strange "Noormahal the Fair" which thrusts the reader into an Orient that is both worrying and dreamlike (XXVII, p. 161-162). In a long and very detailed note, Hugo explains that "Noormahal is an Arabic word that means 'the light of the house'. Some Oriental peoples consider red hair beautiful" (224). Here the poet reveals some of his sources, namely the Arabic poems of the Pre-Islamic period, translated by Ernest Fouinet, a contemporary Orientalist. Whilst asserting that red hair can be attractive to the Arabs, with proof to back him up,[23] Hugo is perfectly aware of the connotations associated with this colour in Western and Christian cultures. Notably associated with lechery, red hair is generally viewed with suspicion, as it is considered to symbolise the passions of the body. Let us also note that this is not a "pure" colour, as it is a mixture of ochre and red. Nourmahal-la-Rousse is therefore, by the hair that identifies her, a hybrid creature, a woman who seems to be the creation of a dream, truly fascinating, in the literal sense of the word—both attractive and repugnant—which explains the state of catalepsy into which the poetic "I" seems to fall, when confronted with this vision: "Yet, rather there be lone/'Mid all those horrors there/Than hear the dulcet tone/And see the gentle gaze of Noormahal the Fair".[24] A "gentle gaze", which has captured the masculine spectator, but also the unfathomable distress of a man reduced to babyhood when confronted with this woman whom we imagine to be gigantic, and whose name, by its sheer length, suggests a disquieting strength.

Nourmahal-la-Rousse transcends all cruelty, even though the bestiary that precedes her in the poem, conjures up the most terrifying beasts—wild animals of Asia and Africa but also a basilisk, a mythological animal whose presence confirms that we are indeed in an imaginary Orient, where *desire* is expressed almost without limits. Yet, this oriental bestiary is heavily loaded with hybridity, and this for two reasons. This hybridity is firstly perceptible in a certain number of predicates that refer to the mixture of shapes and colours ("the stripèd dog, the spotted leopard"[25]). But it also results from the presence, in the very body of *Les Orientales*, of an Arab intertext in which we can very clearly see the images that seduced the young romantic poet—for example in "La Cavale", this line, translated by Fouinet as: "His nostrils blow so violently, they bring to mind the idea of a den of ferocious beasts and hyenas"*.[26] Whilst helping to bring Arab Poetry to a wider audience and to give it an aesthetic legitimacy, as other contemporary writers were doing in different genres (we can think of Stendhal, where one chapter of *De l'Amour* is dedicated to Arabia, or Lamartine's *Voyage en Orient*, which paid great attention to the character of Antar), Hugo also used this same foreign poetry to forge his own.

At the same time, by opening literature to other spatio-temporal arenas[27] Hugo integrates these other worlds—Arab, Turk, Persian—into his own poetic creation, in an open and proudly asserted process of hybridisation—think of the metaphor of the "oeuvre mosque" in the preface of his collection.[28] This contains a self-reflexive dimension that bears on his own creative process. To oppose the classical requirement of the *imitation*, it is not so much the new mythology of the individual genius that the poet uses, but rather an awareness (and a celebration) of the intrinsically plural nature of the French language and of French literature, both of which were forged by the successive contributions of other languages and literatures, even if this blending occurred to varying degrees, depending on the period. Far from the fashionable exoticism to which they have sometimes been reduced, the poems collected in *Les Orientales* play with the crossing of borders, the

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[23] In "The Camel", a poem by Tarafa (author of the longest of the *mu'allaqât*, the "Hanging Poems"), the theme of the redhead is associated both with the animal that the Bedouins venerated and with an erotic context: "She [the camel] turns back at the sound of her rider's voice; and repels the caresses of a thick-haired russet stallion with the lash of her bushy tail," (in Hugo 2000: 225). (English translation : http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/arp/arp013.htm line 15)

[24] "Eh bien ! seul et nu sur la mousse,/Dans ce bois-là je serais mieux/Que devant Nourmahal-la-Rousse,/Qui parle avec une voix douce/Et regarde avec de doux yeux" (XXVII, v. 26-30, p. 162).

[25] "l'hyène rayée", "le léopard tacheté" (XXVII, v. 9-10, p. 161).

[26] "Ses narines rappellent l'idée d'un antre de bêtes féroces et d'hyènes, tant elles soufflent violemment" (227).

[27] The attempt to bridge the gap with foreign literature and periods of history other than European classicism obviously betrays a deeply romantic attitude. But beyond the conflict of schools of thought, Hugo makes his preface into a sort of libertarian manifesto: "Art has no time for borders, handcuffs or gags, it says: Go ! and turns you loose in this great garden of poetry where there is no forbidden fruit. Time and space are for the poet" ("L'art n'a que faire des lisières, des menottes, des bâillons ; il vous dit :Va ! et vous lâche dans ce grand jardin de poésie, où il n'y a pas de fruit défendu. L'espace et le temps sont au poète", p. 47).

[28] "If we ask him what he wanted to do here, he would say it's the Mosque" ("Si on lui demandait ce qu'il a voulu faire ici, il dirait que c'est la mosquée", p. 51). Regarding this question, see Moussa (1999).

destabilisation of identities, the shifting of enunciative points of view. Although fictional, this journey to the other side of the Mediterranean is nevertheless a real encounter between West and East.

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